CHAPTER XX.

"LOVE THE DEBT."

Olivia was not a little tired; this was the true explanation of the tears which had driven her upstairs. It was also the one excuse she saw for herself when she thought the matter over in her own room. Jack had devoted the whole morning to her; it was the squatter’s turn; and, of course, Jack must invite whom he liked to stay as long as he pleased. To think of limiting his freedom in any such matter at the very outset of their engagement! Yet she had been guilty of that thought; but she was tired; she would lie down for an hour.

She lay down for two or three. Excitement had worn her out. It was after five when she awoke and went downstairs. As she did so Claude and Cripps crossed the hall and put on their hats. She hailed Claude.

"What have you done with Jack?"

"I think you’ll find him in the little study at the end of the library."
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"Thanks."

Olivia glanced at Cripps. She had never met him. She wondered who he was, and why Claude did not introduce him to her, and what made both of them so glum. They hurried out of the house as though they were afraid of her. What could it mean? She would find out from Jack; she felt a renewed right to him now, and thought of hints, as she went, for Mr. Dalrymple, if they were still together. But Jack was alone; he was sitting in the dejected attitude engendered by a peculiarly long and low arm-chair.

"Well?" said Olivia, briskly.

"Well?" responded Jack; but he looked at her without rising and without a smile; and both omissions were unlike the lover and the man.

"I half expected to find Mr. Dalrymple with you. I'm so glad he isn't! I—it's my turn, I think!"

"I haven't seen Dalrymple for over an hour," said Jack, with his heavy, absent eyes upon her all the time. "I wonder where he is?"

Olivia would not ask him what the matter was; she preferred to find out for herself, and
then tell him. She looked about her. On a salver were a decanter and three wineglasses; one was unused; and on the floor there lay an end of pink tape. She picked and held it up between finger and thumb.

"Lawyers!" she cried.

"Yes, I've had a solicitor here."

"Not to make your will!"

"No. On a—on a local matter. Don't look at me like that! It's nothing much: nothing new, at all events."

"But you are worried."

She knelt beside his chair, and rested her elbows on the arm, studying his pale set profile. His eyes met hers no longer.

"I am," he admitted; "but that's my own fault. As I say—it's nothing new!"

"Who was the lawyer?"

"You wouldn't know him."

"I mean to know who he was. Mr. Cripps?"

Jack did not answer. He rolled his head from side to side against the back of the chair. His eyes remained fast upon the opposite wall.

"It is—the old trouble," Olivia whispered.

"The trouble of two nights ago!"
His silence told her much. The drops upon his forehead added more. Yet her voice was calm and undismayed; it enabled him at last to use his own.

"Yes!" he said hoarsely. "Claude made a mistake. It was true after all!"

"Hunt's story, darling?"

"Hunt's story. There was an English marriage as well as an Australian one. He had a wife at each side of the world! Claude made a mistake. He went to the wrong church at Chelsea—to a church by the river. He had always thought it was the parish church. It is not. St. Luke's is the parish church, and there in the book they have the marriage down in black and white. Cripps found it; but he first found it somewhere else, where he says they have the records of every marriage in the country since 1850. He would have looked there the day Claude was up, but he left it too late. He looked yesterday, and found it, sure enough, on the date Hunt gave. October 22nd, 1853. And he has been to Chelsea and seen it there. So there's no mistake about it this time; and you see how we stand."

"I see. My poor boy!"

"It's Claude after all. Poor chap, he's awfully cut up. He blames himself so for the mistake between the two churches; but Cripps tells me it was the most natural mistake in the world. Chelsea Old Church—that was where Claude went. And he says he'll never forgive himself."

"But I forgive him," said Olivia, with the first sign of emotion in her voice. She was holding one of his hands; her other was in his hair. Still he stared straight in front of him.

"Of course you forgive him," he said gently.

"When you come to think of it, there's nothing to forgive. Claude didn't make the facts. He only failed to discover them."

"I am glad he did fail," whispered Olivia.

"Glad? You can't be glad! Why do you say that?"

And now he turned his face to her, in his astonishment; and suddenly it was she who could not meet his gaze.

"How can you be glad?" he continued to demand.

"Because—otherwise—you would never—have—spoken——"
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"Spoken? Of course I shouldn't! It's a thousand pities I did. It makes it all the harder—now!"

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you see?"

They had risen with a common instinct. The ice was broken; there were no more shamefaced glances. The girl stood proudly at her full height.

"I see nothing. You say our engagement makes this all the harder for you; it should be just the opposite."

"Will nothing make you see?" cried Jack.

"Oh, how am I to say it? It—it can't go on—our engagement!"

"And why not?"

"I am nothing—nobody—a nameless—"

"What does it matter?" interrupted Olivia passionately. "Do you really think it was the name I wanted after all? You pay me a high compliment! I know exactly what you mean—know exactly what this means to you. To me it makes no difference at all. You are the man you have always been; you are the man—I—love."

His eyes glistened.
"God bless you for saying so! You are the one to love a man the better when he's down on his luck. I know that. Yet we must never——"

"Never what?"

"Marry."

"Not—marry?" She stared at him in sheer amazement. "Not when we promised—only yesterday? You may break your word if you like. Mine I would never break!"

"Then I must. It is not to be thought of any more. Surely you see? It's not that I have lost the money and the title; oh! you must see what it is!"

"Of course I see. But I don't allow the objection."

"Your people would never hear of it now; and quite right too."

"My people! I am of age. I have a little money of my own, enough for us both. I can do exactly what I like. Besides, I'm not so sure about my people; you don't know my father as I know him."

"He is a man of the world. He would not hear of it."
"Then I must act for myself."

"You must not!"

"I must. Do you think I am only a fair-weather girl? I gave you my promise when all was different. I would rather die than break it now."

"But I release you! I set you free! Everything has altered. Oh, can't you put yourself in my place? I should deserve shooting if I married you now. I release you because I must."

"And I refuse to be released."

They regarded one another with hopeless faces. Their eyes were dim with love—yet here they stood apart. This was the deadlock. Nothing could come of this contest of honour against honour, of one unselfish love against another. It was like striking flint upon flint, and steel upon steel. A gong sounded in the distance; it was the signal to dress for dinner. Olivia beat the floor impatiently with one foot; her lips trembled; her eyes filled with tears.

"If you cared for me," she cried passionately, "half as much as you said you did, you wouldn't be so ready to lose me now!"
"If I cared less," he answered, "I would take you at your word—God knows how you tempt me to!—and you should be my wife in spite of all. I would mind less how I dragged you down—what became of us in the end. But I love you too well to spoil your life. Don't you know that, Olivia?"

"Ah, yes! I know it! I know—I know—"

He took her in his arms at last. He was shaking all over. Her head lay back upon his shoulder. He smoothed the hair from the high, white forehead; he looked tenderly and long into the wild wet eyes. His arm tightened about her; he could not help it.

"Sweetheart," he faltered, "you must help me to be strong. It is hard enough as it is. Only help me, or it will be far harder. Help me now—at dinner. I am going to take the head of the table for the last time. Help me by being bright! We can talk afterwards. There is time enough. Only help me now!"

"I will do my best," whispered Olivia, disengaging herself from his trembling arms. "I will try to be as brave as you. Oh,
there is no one in the world like you! Yes, do let us talk about it afterwards; there is so much to say and to decide. But I give you fair warning: I shall never—never—never let you go. Darling, you will need me now! And I cannot give you up—much less after this. Shall I tell you why? You have gone the wrong way to work; you have made me love you more than ever—my hero—my darling—my all!"

She stood a moment at the open door, kissing her hand to him—a rosy flush upon her face—the great tears standing in her eyes. Then she was gone. He watched her down the length of the library; the stained windows dappled her, as she passed, with rubies and sapphires, huge and watery; at the farther door she turned, and kissed her hand again—and fled.